THE DAUUGHTERS OF Z
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But God Remembered

After forty long years of wandering in the desert, the people of Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land. Everyone was to have a piece of the land—everyone, that is, except the women. That was the law and no one questioned the law—no one, that is, except the daughters of Zelophehad. Their names were Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. People affectionately called them the daughters of Z.

Each evening Mahlah and Noa set up their tent. Hoglah and Milcah took it down again when the day's journey began. Tirzah made the evening fire. Year after year, they walked through the desert carrying their tent, dreaming of the land they would one day inhabit.

One night when they were about to enter the Promised Land, Mahlah gathered her sisters around a campfire. "Moses is dividing the land among the men. Our father is dead. We have no brothers. The law says that only sons shall inherit. We must do something, or there will be no land for us."

Noa gazed into the fire. "We have been wandering in the wilderness of sand for so many years that my feet are blistered. They feel like sacks of parched grain. Shall we have no place to truly rest?"

"If it were our enemies who were keeping us from the land, we would understand," said Hoglah. "But it is our own people. For years we have put up with each other. Together we have endured the sharp bristles of the cactus, the sting of the scorpions, and the spitting of the camels."

"We dwelled side by side in tents; we walked together with God," added Tirzah. "Now we are being excluded. We must act before it is too late, or our hope will die away with this fire and we will have nothing."

Milcah proposed a plan. “Tomorrow we will go to the leaders of our people to ask for what is just and right.”

In the morning, the sisters agreed to plead their case before the judges of the people. They would tell them that unless they inherited the land, their father’s name would be lost. This, they were sure the men would understand.

So the daughters of Z went to the judges of the people. They pleaded, “Give us a share of the land.”

The youngest judge answered, “This is not for me to decide.”

The daughters of Z tried to reason. “Should our father’s name be forgotten because he had no sons?”

The older judge answered, “This is the way things are.”

The daughters insisted, “Give us a piece of the land. We will care for it; we will plant gardens.”

The eldest judge refused. “Only sons may inherit. This has always been the law.”

“The judges will never change,” Tirzah sighed. “There is nothing more we can do.”

Hoglah put her arm around her sister. “There is one more thing we can try,” she said. “Tonight we can go to Moses.”

“To Moses!” shouted Noa. “What could five ordinary women possibly say to the great Moses, the one who took us out of Egypt?”

Milcah answered her sister, “We have never been at a loss for words. We are Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. We are women who have wandered in this wilderness. We have waited patiently for the land. We, the daughters of Z, will go to Moses.”

And so it was that when the new moon rose in the night sky, Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah came to Moses. They stood before Moses and the priest Eleazar, the heads of the tribes and all the people who had gathered at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. It rarely happened that women came to this place of God to speak before Moses. No one moved. A great hush came over the whole assembly. Even the wind was still.

Mahlah's voice was shaking as she began to speak. "Our father, Zelophehad of the tribe of Manasseh, died in the wilderness."

Noa's heart was racing. When she heard her sister talk, she gained the courage to speak. "Moses, listen to our plea! Our father was not among those who opposed you. He did you no harm."

"He died and left us alone in the desert," added Tirzah.

Milcah reminded Moses, "He had no sons. We, his daughters, were his only children, and he loved us."

Hoglah's voice grew strong. "Shall our family's name perish in this wilderness with the bristled cactus, the stinging scorpions and the spitting camels? Will you not count us among those who enter the land?"

Moses looked at the daughters of Z, and he looked at all the people who had gathered to hear his decision. He wiped the perspiration from

his forehead, and then he spoke. "Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, you must take your plea to God. I cannot decide."

The people gasped. The daughters of Z trembled. They did not move from where they were standing. The sisters held one another's hands, and they spoke to God:

Our God who brought us out of the land of Egypt,
Hear our plea and bring us into the land of promise.
Your love, God, is not like ours.
We human beings favor some over others.
But You, God, do not play favorites.
You have enough love for all Your creations, for daughters as well as for sons.
Grant us, we pray, Your love and our share in the land.

God spoke to the daughters of Z and said, "With eternal love I have loved you. I have heard your plea, and it is just."

Then God said to Moses, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'If a man dies without leaving a son, his property shall belong to his daughter. Thus shall be the law according to God's command to Moses."

“Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah could hardly believe what had just happened. They would have their own place in the land. They would soak their feet in flowing waters, plant beautiful gardens and eat of milk and honey. God had spoken to them! Afresh wind blew as if it were applauding. The women took timbrels and began to dance and sing praises to God. Many of the people who had gathered at the Tent of Meeting rejoiced, and the daughters of Z led them in celebration.

But not everyone was happy. The men from the tribe of Manasseh, the same tribe as Zelophehad, were not at all pleased with the new law.

They wanted the land to stay within the family. They did not want the daughters of Z to marry outside their tribe.

Moses agreed with the men from the tribe of Manasseh, and he believed that this was God's wish too. So Moses issued another law in the name of God. "The daughters of Z must marry within their father's tribe so that the land will stay in the family. So it shall be for every daughter who inherits her father's land."

The daughters of Z were not pleased with Moses' new law. But this time no one listened to the sisters' objections and God was sad. Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah married within the tribe of Manasseh. They hoped that in time they could change this law.

But after the people had settled in the land of Israel, they forgot about Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They forgot how the daughters of Z had spoken to God and helped make a new law for all the people.

But God remembered the daughters of Z, their courage and their prayer. It is said that their spirit returns to the earth each month when the moon is new, and God's love blesses us all.